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GEORGE MACKAY BROWN'S "CELIA": THE CATHOLIC EVOLUTION OF A SECULAR HEROINE

Linden Bicket

In 1971, when George Mackay Brown's short story "Celia," widely regarded as one of his most important works, was televised in an adaptation by John McGrath, the novelist Christopher Rush remembers sitting in a pub in Brown's native Orkney and watching the barman turn the program off:

Nobody among the drinkers objected. It was quite an interesting moment that, just seeing it being switched off. An unspoken statement. This typified that early hostility, which GMB told me about personally.¹

The poet Stewart Conn, then working for the BBC, also recalls local hostility to Brown:

I was very aware of feedback about George being very offensive to Orkney and undermining Orkney's reputation – quite vehement criticism – I suppose it was an image of drunkenness they were objecting to.²

Indeed, letters to the editor of *The Orcadian* after the broadcast complain about the story's representation of Orkney's "bacchanalian prospects," with one viewer describing it as a "sordid story."³ As this episode suggests, as Brown's creative career progressed in the 1960s and 70s, and he became better known, he would experience also increased (and perhaps not unjustified) anxiety about his work's public reception.

¹ Ron Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown: The Wound and the Gift* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew's Press, 2011), p. 193. "Celia" was one of three Brown stories that McGrath adapted for the BBC series "Play for Today," filmed in September 1970, and aired as "An Orkney Trilogy" on May 13, 1971.

² *Ibid.*

³ Rowena Murray and Brian Murray, *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 109.

Critics of Brown's poetry have often noted his compulsive editing and redrafting, but Brown's writing practices for his prose *oeuvre* have been less explored. "Celia," the televised story which Christopher Rush was prevented from viewing in a Stromness bar, is one example of a text where drunkenness is a major focus. It is also a fine example of Brown's creative process, where the tension between subject matter and anticipated public reaction resulted in the author's removal of a great deal of material from early drafts. However, the material that Brown removed from the early drafts of "Celia" has very little to do with drinking; instead what he eliminated almost completely were references to Catholicism. This article will discuss the implications of Brown's revisions to the two manuscript drafts of the story, now in the National Library of Scotland, both in terms of his creative process, and of what might broadly be called his Catholic imagination. It will focus on Celia Linklater, who emerges as a secular heroine in the published version of the text, but who in Brown's manuscripts was quite a different character.

"Celia" is the first story in Brown's second collection of short fiction, *A Time to Keep* (1969). The book's title, taken from Ecclesiastes 3: 6, signals that eight years on from its author's conversion to Catholicism, scriptural reference was still very much a focus and structural device in Brown's work.⁴ As Alan Bold recognises, this collection deals with "low-lifers," "human wrecks," and characters that "are shaped by a grinding economic poverty that crushes them," but the character of Celia herself is markedly different to the "crofters and fishermen and monks and Vikings" who typically populate Brown's fictional Orkney.⁵ This story of an alcoholic prostitute is Brown's only in-depth character study of a woman through the short story form, and it is also a work which is drawn very much from life.

Since the publication of Maggie Fergusson's award-winning biography, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (2006), much has been written about Stella Cartwright, "the muse of Rose Street," who was engaged to Brown for a time during his undergraduate years in Edinburgh

⁴ In fact, references to scripture and Catholic iconography are present as early as 1959, in the title of Brown's second collection of poetry, *Loaves and Fishes*. This collection includes poems on the subject of the Nativity ("Stars" and "The Lodging"), two poems about St Magnus, Orkney's patron saint ("St Magnus in Egilsay" and "Elegy") and the much-anthologised poem, "Daffodils," about the three Marys present at the Crucifixion.

⁵ Alan Bold, "Orkneyman," *Scotia Review*, 18 (1977): 15-29.

in the 1950s.⁶ The revelation of their relationship firmly put paid to Brown's assertion in his rather guarded autobiography, *For the Islands I Sing* (1997) that "I never fell in love with anybody, and no woman ever fell in love with me."⁷ Cartwright, who Brown claimed "all the contemporary poets in Scotland were in love with... at one time or another," became an alcoholic, and died in 1985 at the age of forty-seven.⁸ Although their engagement did not lead to marriage, Brown and Cartwright corresponded regularly after Brown left Edinburgh and returned to Orkney to write full time, in 1961 – the year in which he was received into the Catholic Church.

In 1966, Brown notes in a letter to Cartwright that he is working on a new short story. He writes, "The girl in the story is called Celia and a good deal of her is based on Stella Cartwright, so you can see she's a dear and fascinating sort of person."⁹ Despite the fact that in "Celia" Brown's female protagonist is taken into an even more grim reality than Stella Cartwright through her prostitution, both women share the same addiction and the same intense empathy for suffering creatures. In his autobiography, Brown claimed that Cartwright "drank, in the end, to dull the pain of life,"

The passing sorrows of the world she was compelled to endure with a double or a triple intensity. She was open, to a dangerous extent perhaps, to the suffering of others; she made instant instinctive response to a torn bird, or some old one too sick to do housework or shopping.¹⁰

Brown and Cartwright shared feelings of guilt (which he believed were the result of psychological "textures of Calvinism, generations old"), and his own struggles with alcohol have been well documented.¹¹ But in his letters to his troubled one-time fiancée, Brown reveals the consolation he found in his newly-adopted faith. In 1964 he writes, "if only you were a

⁶ For more detailed biographical information on Stella Cartwright and her relationship with Brown and other poets, see Maggie Fergusson's *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), pp. 149-161; Brown's *For the Islands I Sing* (London: John Murray, 1997), pp. 136-141; and Stanley Roger Green, "Muse to the Makars," *Scottish Review of Books*, 4:4 (2008): 9.

⁷ George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, p. 79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁹ Rowena Murray and Brian Murray, *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown*, p. 110.

¹⁰ George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, p. 138.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Catholic! At least it would give you firm ground under your feet. At best it would show you a great many things shot through with a new beauty.”¹² He writes:

What is wrong, I think, is not so much a ‘guilt complex’ as a *genuine religious sense* that is deeply implanted in you but which you have never been able to express fully. You remind me a lot of that truly good woman in Graham Greene’s novel ‘The End of the Affair,’ who came at last to truth and beauty and God through the shifting fantasies that we all have to endure every day.¹³

Brown’s Celia is an amalgamation of Stella Cartwright and Graham Greene’s Sarah Miles, the adulteress who performs miracles after her death. The dramatic monologue at the heart of “Celia” often echoes the sad confessions found in Cartwright’s letters to Brown. And Celia’s restless search for (and at times, rejection of) God as she confesses her sins resonates powerfully with Sarah Miles’s diary entries, which make up the central section of Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951).

“Celia” is a short story in nine parts, painting events from Monday to Sunday in the life of a young woman who critics have described variously as “a drunken tart” and “a girl with a drink problem caused by her excessive sensibility and idealism,” indicating that critical reaction to this character has been as divisive as the reaction to her in Brown’s fictive and real life community.¹⁴ Like Stella Cartwright, who lived in a “dark, damp basement flat in Fettes Row,” Celia lingers in a dimly-lit bedroom which becomes the stage for her morbid brooding, depression and sin.¹⁵ Ian Bell has accused Brown, “like so many poets who turn to prose,” of being “over-fond of symbolism,” and this is arguably the case in “Celia,” which includes over forty references to the young woman’s fire, and to the oppressive lamplight and gloom in which she sits.¹⁶ The hellish “red

¹² Letter of George Mackay Brown to Stella Cartwright, 27 November 1964, Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, MS 3117.1; this and other items from this collection quoted by permission of Brown’s literary executor, Mr. Archie Bevan, and Edinburgh University Library.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1964.

¹⁴ Alan Bold, *George Mackay Brown* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1978), p. 58; J. Graeme Roberts, “Tradition and Pattern in the Short Stories of George Mackay Brown,” in *Literature of the North*, ed. David Hewitt and Michael Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), p. 182.

¹⁵ Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 175.

¹⁶ Ian Bell, “Brown’s Orkney Odyssey,” *Sunday Herald* (Aug. 1 2004), accessed:

and yellow flames," "seething darkness," and "grunting, breathing, slithering, cursing shadows" are indicative of the bleak sexual transactions that take place in Celia's bedroom, and contrast sharply with the sun, which at the end of the text "fold[s] the girl in the light of a new day."¹⁷ While this ending suggests the possibility of grace for Celia, the text is mainly centred on her lengthy monologue, or rather her confession, which in Brown's Catholic sacramental universe allows the girl to unburden herself of guilt and repent her sins, before her sunlit "resurrection."

The first words spoken by Celia in the published text are addressed to the mostly-silent Reverend Andrew Blackie, the town's minister: "'No,' said Celia to the minister, 'I don't believe in your God. It's no good. You're wasting your time'" (15). These words mark the beginning of her monologue, in which she describes the death of her parents – her father, a fisherman, "in from his creels for the last time" after drowning, and her mother, a hardworking woman whose final moments were "degrading and unblessed" (17-18). In order to take flight from the pain of life, Celia enters into "another country" – an alcohol-fuelled escapist fantasy. The girl's urgent questions reach a climax with her demand for a theological explanation of poverty and suffering:

God rules everything. He knew what was going to happen before the world was made. So we're told. If that's goodness, I have another name for it. Not the worst human being that ever lived would do the things God does. Tell me this, was God in the Warsaw ghetto too? (16)

But rather than offering some kind of scriptural explanation, or pastoral advice after hearing Celia's discourse on the cruelty surrounding her, the minister's response is an ineffectual platitude: "'Celia,' said Reverend Andrew Blackie, a little hopelessly, 'you must try to have faith'" (22).

It is worth remembering that, when he wrote "Celia," Brown was still a (relatively) new Catholic. Like Graham Greene, whose youthful conversion "had the effect of positioning him in a religious, intellectual history that enabled him to critique the comfortable liberalism of his English Protestant roots at the same time that it offered him support for his creative turn to the religious interiority of his characters," Brown's adopted faith allowed him to critique the Presbyterian climate of his

<http://www.georgemackaybrown.co.uk/Interrogation%20Reviews.htm>.

¹⁷ George Mackay Brown, "Celia," *A Time to Keep* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1969), pp. 4, 14, 31, 37, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

native Orkney, while also fleshing out the inscape of Celia's emerging religious imagination.¹⁸ The girl's words reveal her notion of God as a Calvinistic tyrant, who, like Spark's "God of Calvin" Miss Jean Brodie, "knows the beginning and the end" and offers no possibility of respite or grace. But Blackie's response is bleaker still. Surely, Brown appears to suggest, if the man of God is "hopeless," there must be something flawed in the religion he follows.

Indeed, Celia's bitter questions echo the views that Brown was himself espousing in his early twenties, around two decades previously. In a letter to his friend, the historian Ernest Marwick, he writes:

I grow more and more sick of the Church of Scotland. By nature I am interested in religion (if not strictly speaking a religious person) and the pale watery Calvinism of present day Orkney frankly disgusts me.... I could live cheerfully in a Catholic country, or in pre Reformation Orkney if that were possible. The present day organised religious life here is shocking; much worse than atheism.¹⁹

This early and rather immature letter displays that Brown's religious ideas and opinions were still forming at this point, and it is highly unlikely that he would have written anything so blunt about the Church of Scotland in later life. As his late revisions of several poems show, he became anxious not to offend his readership, and especially those with religious faith. But this short passage in Brown's letter nods to the brand of religion offered by the Reverend Andrew Blackie – a "pale watery Calvinism" – its minister struggling and inadequate to the task of pastoral counsel.

However, in Brown's two manuscript drafts of "Celia," Blackie is quite a different man, and Celia expresses her desire for another kind of Christianity in a fuller way. She speaks in the same vein as the young Brown in his letter to Marwick, and of particular note is her utterance, scribbled on a small scrap of paper which Brown inserts into the back of his first manuscript draft of the text. The girl sighs, "If only he was actually among us in all his glory man and God, and not a cold word in a

¹⁸ Mark Bosco SJ, "From *The Power and the Glory* to *The Honorary Consul*: The Development of Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination," *Religion and Literature*, 36.2 (2004): 51-74 (56).

¹⁹ Letter of George Mackay Brown to Ernest Walker Marwick, undated but likely to be written in the late 1940s, Orkney Library and Archive, D31/30/4; quoted by permission of Brown's literary executor, Mr. Archie Bevan, and Orkney Library and Archive.

book.”²⁰ This “cold word” points to her dissatisfaction with Calvinism’s focus on revelation solely through scripture, rather than, for example, Catholicism’s emphasis on revelation through both sacred tradition and scripture, as well as sacramental encounter with Christ. In this manuscript, Celia tells the minister:

‘I’m a young woman in a parish of fisher folk and crofters’, said Celia. ‘We’re not at home with words and ideas. It isn’t the eternal infinite God that interests me so much. You can’t be on terms of friendship with an idea. I want God to be actually present in the town, so that I can visit him and speak to him whenever I want. If only I could see the crib and the cross. If only he could feed me the way he fed the multitude with bread and fish, a boy’s gift. If only his passion stood all about me, in pictures and images, sorrow after sorrow, then maybe in time I could learn to accept the random cruelties of the world. I would have faith then that the lion and lamb would lie down together some day, and there would be peace between the gull and the rat.

So far God is only a word in a book. (ms 1)

This key section is unique to Brown’s first draft, and it immediately signals two important ideas that are deemphasised in the published version of the text: first, the presence of both Brown and his heroine’s Catholic imagination, and second, Catholicism’s sacramental universe, and in particular the primordial sacrament of the Eucharist. Celia’s words reveal her yearning for a less scripture-centred, more visual and more tangible faith. Hers is the type of imagination identified by the theologian David Tracy as “analogical” – one which delights in image, metaphor and analogy (and which he argues is notable in the works of Catholic artists) to stress the closeness, or immanence of God in the world. Celia’s longing for “the crib and the cross” and “pictures and images, sorrow after sorrow” is clearly a deliberate nod to Catholic iconography, and especially, in the latter description, to the chapel devotion of the Stations of the Cross. The sociologist Andrew Greeley writes:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious

²⁰ George Mackay Brown, manuscript 1 of “Celia,” dated August 1966, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4835/14. Further references to this MS in parentheses are given in parentheses in the text. This and subsequent quotations from this collection are quoted by permission of Brown’s literary executor, Mr. Archie Bevan, and the National Library of Scotland.

medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.²¹

The traditional criticism of such paraphernalia is that it comes close to idolatry, and this would surely be the case in Celia's deeply Presbyterian surroundings: her step-father, Thomas, refuses to allow the girl Christmas cards, tinsel and paper bells, "and so the walls the remained bare" (19). His distrust of decoration and ornament are in stark contrast to Celia's desire for the sacramentals which under a Catholic perspective reveal grace and give comfort, reminding the faithful of God's on-going and active creativity in the material world. The comparison with Greene's Sarah Miles is not initially straightforward in this instance, but the heroines' attraction to Catholicism does seem to spring from the same source. Where Celia aches for pictures and images, Sarah Miles writes in her diary that she has lingered in a Catholic church, and finds the statues "like bad coloured pictures in Hans Andersen: they were like bad poetry, but somebody had needed to write them."²² When Sarah's husband recalls the crucifix they gaze at in a Spanish church, he says dismissively, "'Of course it's a very materialistic faith. A lot of magic....'"²³

Sarah's husband is not entirely mistaken in his identification of the importance of materials in Catholic worship. Indeed, Celia's words to the Blackie in Brown's first manuscript point very firmly to the most central, material and spiritual of all the sacraments: the Eucharist. Where transubstantiation would seem to Henry Miles to be "a lot of magic," for Catholics it is the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ that is made wholly and entirely present under the appearances of bread and wine. Celia's desire for God to be "actually present," and her hunger to be fed "the way he fed the multitude with bread and fish" are deeply-felt yearnings for sacramental encounter with God through the accidents of bread and wine. The need to "visit him and speak to him whenever I want" signals the girl's unconscious wish for the opportunity to take part

²¹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 1.

²² Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 88.

²³ *Ibid.*

in the Catholic practise of Eucharistic adoration, where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed and adored by the faithful.

But this longing does not come without torment for Brown's heroine, who is anything but a meditative, serene catechumen. In Brown's first manuscript, she tells Blackie:

That's all there is to tell, really. You have heard the full confession of an alcoholic. It's a fairy tale with a bad ending. The princess gets changed piecemeal back into a toad. Once a month, maybe every six weeks, Celia feels she must go in search for the lost country. It isn't a wayward desire, it's an overmastering compulsion. For a week or more drink is my life.
(ms 1)

Like Greene's Sarah Miles, who feels that God cannot possibly love her, "a bitch and a fake" (76), Celia's self-loathing is clear. Her alcoholism is a horribly warped version of the Eucharist – a devilish distortion of the sacrament instituted by Christ – and she feels continually tortured by the evidence of suffering in her surroundings. In the published version of "Celia," the girl confesses,

I drink because I'm frightened. I'm so desperately involved with all the weak things, lonely things, suffering things I see about me. I can't bear the pity I feel for them, not being able to help them at all. There's blood everywhere. The world's a torture chamber, just a sewer of pain. That frightens me. (15)

This statement echoes the sentiments in one of Stella Cartwright's letters to Brown from 1965, the year before he began work on "Celia." She wrote:

George my dear, dear friend, please take a warning from Stella: don't abuse alcohol. I would hate to have you in the state I am in. ... If only we did not need to hide our miseries – we would probably not need booze. There is not enough kindness, tolerance & understanding in this day and age.²⁴

Two years previously, Brown had admitted: "There's so much pain and sickness in the world. Suffering is a mystery, especially when naturally good people like yourself and my mother have so much to put up with."²⁵

The mystery of suffering and cruelty is a major theme in the account of her alcoholism that Celia gives to Blackie. And again, Brown's early

²⁴ Letter of Stella Cartwright to George Mackay Brown, 4 April 1966, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 10209/6/65.

²⁵ Letter of George Mackay Brown to Stella Cartwright, 28 September 1964, Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, MS3117.1.

manuscripts contain a much richer and lengthier description of this than does his final, canonical text. Only in Brown's first manuscript does Celia declare:

This thing of life and death and suffering, it's everywhere. Even the things that must be done are snarled up in it. The same Rognvald Leask who sent you here is a good man, I know that. But every day he puts his hook in the jaw of haddocks. What happens to the lobsters he takes in his creel? They're dropped alive into boiling pots in the hotel. And even his corn, that bright field on the side of the hill, has to be killed before it can be food. We feast on cruelty. Cruelty is the root of every good and beautiful thing.

Once more, the girl appears to give vent to her developing Catholic, incarnational imagination. Her words about the "bright field" of corn have a Eucharistic timbre, and this comes as no surprise when considering Brown's own reflections on the analogous value of his agricultural surroundings in Orkney. Often in his work, the archetypal crofter becomes by analogy an Orcadian Christ, with the painful labour of ploughing and drilling echoing the Passion, and the harvest of corn pointing to the risen Lord. Celia may as well be talking about the crucifixion when she identifies cruelty and violence as the root of all that is good and beautiful – or indeed, a source of grace. And this is a point that Angela Alaimo O'Donnell argues is a key element of Catholic fiction:

It is corporeal, perhaps even bloody-minded, in its insistence upon an embodied, incarnate faith; it is grim in its acknowledgement of the presence and power of real evil in the world; and it is ultimately hopeful in its assertion of the meaning of suffering and in its persistent search for God even when God seems to be absent.... Catholic art depicts transcendent truth made manifest in the material reality of the word, especially through the body.²⁶

Accordingly, in this manuscript it is not only the alcoholic body of Celia that points to the broken and wounded body of Christ in the Eucharist, but also cruelty and the suffering bodies of those around her. (It is notable in this regard that Celia nurses her step-father as he endures a

²⁶ Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, "Seeing Catholicly: Poetry and the Catholic Imagination," in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. by James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 331-51 (337-8).

painful chest complaint, which does not sound dissimilar to the tuberculosis that also afflicted Brown.)

The basis for Celia in Greene's Sarah Miles is again an intertextual undercurrent here. It is Sarah who is shocked by the brutality of the crucified Christ:

And of course on the altar there was a body too – such a familiar body..., that it had never struck me before as a body with all the parts of a body, even the parts the loin-cloth concealed. I remembered one in a Spanish church I had visited with Henry, where the blood ran down in scarlet paint from the eyes and the hands. It had sickened me.... I thought, these people love cruelty.
(89)

Despite her horror at the cruelty at the heart of this image, the beginnings of divine love are working within Sarah in *The End of the Affair*, and in defiance of "all the reasonable and the detached," she walks out of a London church "in a flaming rage," dips her fingers in "the so-called holy water" and makes "a kind of cross" on her forehead (89-90). Similarly, after her discourse on cruelty, Celia tells the minister: "I'm against the blind cruel fate that your church adores" (ms 1). Yet by end of Brown's second manuscript draft (and this also finds its way into his published short story), her monologue ends this way: "'I want to have faith,' said Celia. 'I want that more than anything else in the world'" (22).

Celia's (and Sarah Miles's) sins are primarily of the flesh, and so, in the same way that her alcoholism points to a perverted form of the Eucharist, Celia's prostitution is also a warped version of the divine love that is disclosed during human passion. While the alcoholic and suffering body are a major focus of this short story, so too is the prostituted body. In Brown's first manuscript draft, Celia appears to hint that her discussions with Blackie occur regularly. She says "There's only one good thing in life, and that's this friendship. It takes in pity and tenderness and concern, they are all a part of it" (ms 1). But she speaks frankly to the minister about her prostitution, and continues: "I would call it love only I think then of Mr Snoddy fumbling for my mouth in the darkness, and other things, much worse. All the same, it means that in some way or another, there is perfection and wholeness. And the being that exists in that perfection is God, an entirely selfless spirit of love" (ms 1). In Brown's manuscript of "Celia" the freely-offered and divine gift of grace is equated with wholeness, but for that grace to exist there must initially have been brokenness or pain. Celia recognises that the "small lusts and affections" of her clients seem "like broken lights of a perfect

love,” and adds that “broken, imperfect things mean that somehow, somewhere there is a wholeness” (ms 1).

The paradoxical nature of Christ’s kingship and triumph over sin through the image of his broken and wounded body is discussed at length by Angela O’Donnell, and she links this persuasively to a specifically Catholic devotion:

An ancient devotional practice – one traceable, ultimately, to Calvary – is to place oneself at the foot of the cross and enter into Christ’s suffering.... To do so is not only to partake in Christ’s pain, but also to be absorbed, inevitably, as a participant in the crime of the crucifixion. Theologically speaking, human sin (our common inheritance) is both the cause and justifying purpose of Christ’s death, making the latter a lamentable but absolutely necessary eschatological event. Thus, the watcher at the cross must hold in suspension twin realities: the shame of sin and the grandeur of God’s grace that turns even our evil to good.²⁷

Celia is just such a “watcher at the Cross,” and it is surely no coincidence that in Brown’s manuscripts, Blackie tells her: “Make your drunkenness a part of your sorrow, and offer it to Christ” (ms 1). Celia must unite her suffering with Christ’s and participate in the crucifixion before she can repent and receive grace. This very different early Blackie tells the girl that

love went through the millstones of cruelty and suffering. I’m talking about Christ’s wounds and his death. He said he was God. He offered himself for the whole world, eternal bread and drink for ever, a satisfaction for the hungers of all time. (ms 1)

Notably, the moment of grace, where Celia is folded “in the light of a new day,” comes after washing and tending to her ailing stepfather in the final section of the text (both published and in manuscripts), and she thus becomes a kind of Orcadian Mary Magdalene – a repentant prostitute at the foot of the cross.

But what are we to make of this early version of the Reverend Andrew Blackie, still to all intents and purposes a minister of the Presbyterian Kirk, but surely also a thinly-veiled Catholic priest? Mark Bosco notes that in the novels of Graham Greene “the incarnation is revealed to characters when they discover that their sins or their suffering bring them into an analogical relationship with the suffering God in Christ.”²⁸ The Blackie of Brown’s early manuscripts enables Celia to tick

²⁷ O’Donnell, pp. 340-41.

²⁸ Bosco, as in n. 18 above, p. 58.

this box very neatly when he counsels her to make her drunkenness a part of her sorrow and offer it to Christ. Indeed, his use of analogy is marked throughout the lengthy speech he gives – one that is a world away from the simple maxim (“you must try to have faith”) which he utters in the published “Celia.”

In the published text, Celia tells the minister: “I could never be a member of your church. All I could bring to it is this guilt, shame, grief for things that happen, a little pity, a sure knowledge of exile. Will Christ accept that?” (21). The Blackie of Brown’s second manuscript draft had told her:

‘Celia,’ he said, ‘I want you to understand that this sense of exile is a grace that isn’t given to many. Hold onto that. Exile – the very notion means that a kingdom of some kind is there, never doubt it.

‘We Christians believe in a King who rules earth and heaven in eternal glory.

‘This king lived in the world for a short time. He shared our exile. He was as harried and put upon as any Viet Nam peasant. In the end we killed him.

‘But the Kingdom lasts for ever.

‘Think of two utterances, Celia – ‘Thy Kingdom come and The Kingdom of God is within you. The silence between is the history of every soul. I think faith is a lonely pilgrimage from one state to the other – you know, from the disorder and anarchy of every human life, however rich and unimportant it seems to be, to a realisation of Christ’s indwelling majesty. The road between lies through barren places, it’s true. For some of us – for you, Celia, it’s hard going. For the saint it can be total deprivation, if that’s any comfort to you. (ms 2)

Here we see a priest figure, modelled very much on the clergymen of Greene’s novels (who often comment “on the possibility of redemption for the hero” in their tales’ concluding chapters).²⁹ This speech certainly mirrors the one given by the old priest at the conclusion of Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938), where in the confessional he counsels Rose, the girlfriend of Pinkie Brown. Greene’s priest “listened – patiently – whistling, while she painfully brought out her whole agony.”³⁰ He alludes to the essayist and poet Charles Péguy, who never received the sacraments, but, under the priest’s perspective, may have been a saint.

²⁹ Bosco, *loc. cit.*

³⁰ Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1943), p. 245.

And he tells Rose, “You can’t conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God.”³¹ Péguy asserted that “the sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. Nobody is so competent as the sinner in matters of Christianity. Nobody, except the saint.”³² Péguy’s statement underpins the words of Greene’s priest, and it suggests how we might read the words of Brown’s minister, Mr. Blackie. In her sin and desperation Celia is closer to God than any of the respectable members of the community, who she knows “would call me a whore and an alcoholic if I so much as darkened the door [of the kirk]” (ms 1). In Brown’s manuscripts Celia makes her confession to a Blackie who recognises only a loving Christ – one who loves the outcast and the marginalised so much that He claims prostitutes, lepers and tax-collectors will enter heaven before the pious and sanctimonious.

The Reverend Andrew Blackie of Brown’s early manuscripts is also well aware that Celia’s imagination is a Catholic one, and he feeds it with images of Catholic belief and devotion, telling her “*Blood of Christ, inebriate me*, the Catholics pray before they go to their communion. This is the only kind of intoxication, the happiness of knowing that Christ is coming to reign inside you” (ms 1). His final reference to saints highlights that Celia’s name is close to that of St Cecilia the martyr and that she, like Greene’s Sarah Miles, may have saintly qualities.

Nothing so explicitly Catholic-sounding appears in Brown’s published text. His minister is stripped of all pastoral guidance and instead of speaking in a comforting, “deep gentle grumble” (ms 1), he falters and stays largely silent. Interestingly, by 1976, in a later story, Brown allows one of his characters, a minister, to compare himself quite explicitly to a Catholic priest. In “A Winter’s Tale” from *The Sun’s Net*, the minister admits that he would feel more qualified to administer better pastoral care if he were able to hear confessions. He says: “I see souls in pain in this island that I can’t do a thing for, because they won’t declare their troubles to me. That’s why I sometimes wish I was called Father Grantham, and had a little dark confession box full of whispers in a

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

³² Charles Péguy, “Un Nouveau théologien: M. Fernand Laudet,” *Oeuvres de prose, 1909-1914* (Paris: Gallimard/Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), pp. 1074-76, quoted in Marion Crowe, *Aiming at Heaven, Getting the Earth: The English Catholic Novel Today* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 39.

corner of the church. Then they might come and tell me their troubles, and I would be able to dispense supernatural comfort."³³

All of this leads to the question of why Brown removed Catholic material from his final version of "Celia." Though the published short story is not an entirely secular-sounding work (as noted previously, Brown's heroine does admit to wanting faith "more than anything else in the world"), it is missing the excerpts quoted above. As such, the published story becomes more of a critique of Presbyterianism than it was originally intended to be, and it can be argued that the first drafts are, instead, a celebration of the sacramental imagination. Indeed, Brown's revisions have shaped critical reaction to the tale. Berthold Schoene points out that "There is embarrassingly little true communication between the minister and Celia, mirroring a far more disheartening, general lack of communication between man and heaven, grounded for Brown in Protestantism's lack of rituals and symbolic gestures."³⁴ In his analysis of Celia's discourse and Blackie's response, Alan Bold writes: "In the presbyterian tradition drink is something evil taken by evil people to sustain their evil natures; so it is not surprising that Celia's confession falls on deaf ears."³⁵

It may of course be that Brown felt that the Catholic-sounding material in his early drafts of "Celia" was too heavy and proselytising. It is certainly possible that he was all too aware of many of the traditional and repeated criticisms of Catholic fiction. As the critic Marion Crowe writes, it may be that "'aversion to any hint of the didactic in literature is by far the most common objection to writing that attempts to introduce religious themes" and that for a literary work to appear to advocate a religious message is "tantamount to literary suicide."³⁶ Scottish literary criticism is notably quiet on subject of the Catholic imagination: this might be traced back to an essentially Protestant tradition, including the work of Kurt Wittig, Gregory Smith *et al*, but readings of Brown which miss the Catholic elements of his work are not all the critics' fault. His elimination of material directly referencing his adopted faith means that some detective work is required when considering his religious themes.

³³ George Mackay Brown, "A Winter's Tale," *The Sun's Net* (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1992), p. 37.

³⁴ Berthold Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 151.

³⁵ Alan Bold, *George Mackay Brown*, p. 58.

³⁶ Crowe, as in n. 33 above, pp. 3, 5.

This article has frequently drawn comparisons with Greene, a writer whom Brown deeply admired. It is also possible that Brown was reluctant to become another Greene, a writer whose private life and faith were continually brought into discussions of his work. This would surely have horrified Brown, who was desperate to remain private throughout his career, writing in a letter to his friend, Sr. Margaret Tournour: "It may be that abounding fame – such as GG experienced – is one of the worst things that can happen to a person. Bad for his art, too: maybe his best work was done when he was comparatively unknown."³⁷ In any case, it is clear that in the 1960s, Brown was reluctant to publish something so obviously religious in tone. In another letter to Tournour, Brown writes that after reading *Godspells*, he finds that "it is maybe too much soaked in 'the spiritual' where I find it difficult to breathe freely, longing always to keep one foot at least on the earth."³⁸

After the publication of his first collection of short fiction, *A Calendar of Love* (1967), Brown's mother delivered her verdict: "it's all about drinking," she said.³⁹ After some thought, Brown realised that this was true, and that depicting the change that alcohol puts on people gave him "a kind of insight into the workings of the mind: how under the drab surface complexities, there exists a ritualistically simple world of joy and anger."⁴⁰ But as the evaluation of the first manuscript drafts of his much-anthologised short story "Celia" makes clear, it was not this world that the author shied away from presenting to his growing audience, but the very private one of the process of conversion, faith and new-found religious devotion.

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³⁷ Letter of George Mackay Brown to Sr. Margaret Tournour, 22 September 1994; this and the next item are in the private possession of Maggie Fergusson and are quoted by permission of Brown's literary executor, Mr. Archie Bevan, and Maggie Fergusson.

³⁸ Letter of G.M. Brown to Sr. Margaret Tournour, Maundy Thursday 1992; *Godspells* (1992) is a text by John Prickett, which Sr. Tournour illustrated.

³⁹ George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, p. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*